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ABSTRACT

Since the entire fabric of one's historical knowledge is based on inferences drawn by historians in their readings of primary sources, a study of their reading habits, and a comparison of those habits with the habits of others who read for the purposes of discovery and interpretation may lead to areas of mutual interest or benefit. Although the differences between social history, intellectual history, and political history may initially seem so great that no single discipline (history) can encompass them all, it should be remembered that there is the same preference in them for primary sources, the same need to construe them referentially, and thus the same requirement that no source can be read except in the context of an ensemble of relevant others. The same sorts of questions raised by historians, such as whether the intentions of the author can be recovered, also preoccupy literary critics. An empathetic reconstruction of the author's situation is one of the methods used to recover that meaning, and the reading and interpretation of that text is based upon that intentional fallacy. To historians trained in documentary or verificationist readings, where the point is to abstract and test factual claims, reading works of history as rhetoric will seem a mistake. However, since the rhetorical aspects of historical works have been so often repressed, such an observation should make the reader aware of those rhetorical aspects. (PPB)

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HISTORIANS READING/READING HISTORIANS

Richard T. Vann

This talk grows out of a paper written for a different audience: an assembly of literary critics gathered to discuss styles of reading in the various disciplines. I was thus asked not to speculate how much historians might learn from the practices of literary critics, but how our own differed from theirs. In the course of doing this, though, I borrowed from literary theory in a way which, I think, may show what benefits we historians can derive from our colleagues who deal mainly with fictive narratives.

Of course we borrow promiscuously from all sorts of other disciplines; but chiefly, in the last forty years, from the social sciences. Some historians have been brought to admit that they are writers, and thus necessarily employers of rhetoric; but few have thought very deeply about themselves as readers. The place to start an inquiry into historians reading is in fact to observe them misreading, since it is the disputes within a discipline that show what its underlying codes are. I shall take examples from social history, political history, and intellectual history.

Now the only basis for any statement that historians can legitimately make is the texts and textualized remainders that survive from the past; so the entire fabric of our historical knowledge is the inferences made by readers of these texts or "sources." We customarily distinguish between "primary" and "secondary" sources. Sometimes the former word is used for every document or artifact that was produced contemporaneously with the event or structure being studied, whereas the latter is reserved for the subsequent accounts of those events or structures. For my purposes I think a better distinction can be made as follows:

Primary sources are the records of performative utterances made in the past; secondary sources, regardless of when they were produced, are, in J. L. Austin's words, "constative"--that is, they consist of statements about those utterances and actions.

Typically peformative utterances order or do an action. My favorite examples come from the scene at the end of the movie The African Queen, when the characters played by Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn have been dragged aboard the Königen Louisa and are about to be hanged as British spies. The captain, granting their last request, says, "I now pronounce you man and wife. Proceed with the execution."

Primary, or performative, sources are always preferred, and for this reason: to be effective, they are usually designed to be unambiguous; and as events in themselves, rather than recitals of events, they are free of the vagaries of memory and the play of desire which affects eyewitness accounts, personal letters or entries in diaries. In short, they can be taken, or mistaken, for "facts." They can be plucked from their contexts, aggregated, and subjected to statistical analysis. Most of the social history that has been written in the past three decades is of exactly this sort: recombination of hundreds or thousands of discrete records of performative utterances.

Nevertheless, even these apparently least ambiguous records can be misread. A constant danger is that the words remain the same, but the meaning of the acts they perform has changed--as is often the case with marriage, in fact. Or the words themselves resist easy interpretation. A good example can be found in one of the famous skirmishes in the "war over the gentry" which engaged English social historians just after World War II. One of the sources used by Lawrence Stone to show the decline of the English aristocracy was what he identified as bonds of Statute Merchant which he took to be the official

records of loans made mostly by the rich merchants and lawyers of the city of London. Stone used these as evidence of the financial distress of the nobility. He noted that some bonds, or recognizances, bore in the margin a note giving the date of official cancellation "either by repayment of the debt, or 'capta in rure' (meaning presumably the surrender of land to the creditor)." But many bonds had no note that they were ever cancelled, which Stone took to be a sign that the debt was not retired.

Four years later Stone's argument, and in particular his reading of the bonds of Statute Merchant, was reviewed by H. R. Trevor-Roper. It is instructive to consider how he approaches Stone's reading of the bonds of Statute Merchant--or rather, as he argues, Statute Staple. By consulting legal textbooks and Elizabethan statutes he argues that these bonds were not, contrary to appearances, records of loans; they were security for a loan. Although the bonds were registered, two other documents were not: the "condition," stating the sum of the actual loan, and the "defeasance," cancelling the security after the loan had been repaid. Since these were private papers, they never passed into the crown's archives, and so have not survived. The consequences for Stone's reading are momentous. He confused the sum pledged as security with the amount borrowed, whereas the security would naturally be larger (typically almost twice as large); and since he did not realize that the record acknowledging the repayment of the loan, the "defeasance," would not be in the archives, he wrongly construed the absence of a formal cancellation of the bond as a sign that the loan remained unpaid. The result of these two errors was greatly to exaggerate the extent and duration of the peers' indebtedness. As for the "ominous," and certainly enigmatic, phrase "capta in rure," Trevor-Roper offers no definitive reading, but finds Stone's translation, "taken in land," to be "most improbable." "In

ordinary Latin rus='the country' as distinct from the town, not land as distinct from other assets," he points out. Besides his lexical objection to the translation of "in rure" as "in land," he notes that there was no correlation of the use of these words in the recognizance books and relevant transfers of land that he had "happened to trace."

I am sure most of you now know more about how to borrow money in Elizabethan England than you cared to learn; but of course it is the form rather than the content of the arguments that interests us here. First, although the articles of both Stone and Trevor-Roper are filled with quotations extracted from their original contexts, none of these should have been read in isolation. Cruxes like "capta in rure" have to be resolved not only by appeals to ordinary Latin usage, but also in reference to an array of other documents about land transactions.

Historians use such procedures only because they take it as axiomatic that the language they read refers to people who really lived and to events that really occurred in the past. Furthermore, because of this axiom of referentiality, it is in principle necessary for the historian to read all the documents referring to such people and events in order to make valid inferences about them. But here the necessarily inter-textual character of historical work make an impossible demand. Not all the relevant documents have survived; indeed, often only a few of them have. Worse still, the process of documentary survival is capricious; it is hard to know whether a document never existed, was deliberately or accidentally destroyed at the time, was subsequently lost, or perhaps is still around in some other collection where nobody has thought of searching for it. (There is no explanation why the bonds on Statute Staple were preserved among the papers of the Lord Chamberlain; Stone only knew about them because Trevor-Roper noticed them there).

This explains why historians place such a high value on extensive reading, often to the detriment of intensive reading. Social historians, in particular, characteristically read what nobody else would have any earthly interest in reading. Progress in historiography typically depends on discovery of new sources and showing them to be relevant to old questions, or reading them to answer new questions. Such discoveries are sometimes the fruits of mindless empiricism, of aimless wandering in muniments rooms or idly leafing through a calendar of manuscripts. More often, though, they are found because historians turn their attention to new issues. It was thought, for example, that there were too few community listings to be useful to the English social historian; now, after the searches of local historians and genealogists throughout England, more than four hundred have come to light.

Nevertheless, there are over ten thousand parishes in England. Because the surviving relevant documents, especially those for social history, are such a small and unrepresentative sample of those that presumably originally existed, historians have to read with particular alertness to the silences in their texts--exactly a point literary critics have lately been making.

The reading of social historians is concerned with the fragmentary records of everyday life, and is typically linked to a coding process; since the historian wants to make a quantitative analysis she tries to assign each record to as few significant categories as possible. Other kinds of historians have different practices, so that to some observers the differences between social history, political history, and intellectual history seem so great that there is no single discipline called "history" that can encompass them. Social history can be seen as sociology "with long series and bad data," intellectual history as more appropriately housed in a department of criticism generally. But one argument against such an extensive amputation of

the body of history is that the practice of reading in political history is similar in several respects to that in social history. There is the same preference for primary (=performative) sources, the same need to construe them referentially, and thus the same requirement that no source can be read except in the context of an ensemble of relevant others. Political historians also typically read texts which few others--perhaps only constitutional lawyers--would have any independent interest in reading.

The ratio of surviving to lost sources is considerably higher in political than in social history. The state takes care of its own, documentarily, and--at least before the era of the telephone and the shredder--politicians usually had to communicate their wishes and opinions on paper, which most of them were too vain not to keep for future publication. But whereas social history typically aims at the compilation and quantitative analysis of a large number of discrete bits of text, political historians characteristically read whole texts, and sometimes even the longer forms. These fall into quite different genres than those read by literary critics--laws, treaties, orations, for example--but they raise the same sorts of questions, especially about whether the intentions of the authors can be recovered--that have preoccupied some literary critics since World War II.

A good illustration, which also turns on the reading of a Latin phrase, comes from the work of one of the greatest English historians, Frederic William Maitland. Maitland claims to have made an historical discovery not through discovering a text nobody else had read, but through noticing a phrase that his predecessors had ignored. He describes the problem he set out to solve as follows:

> For nearly two hundred and fifty years the solemn style and title of the king or queen of this country ended with the words "and so forth," or in Latin et caetera. On the first day of the nineteenth century a change was made. Queen Victoria's grandfather became king of a "United Kingdom" of Great Britain and Ireland. He ceased to be king of France. He also ceased to be "and so forth."

Had this phrase always been meaningless? I venture to suggest that it had its origin in a happy thought, a stroke of genius.

Queen Elizabeth, Maitland claimed--wrongly, it turns out--was the first English sovereign to style herself in this way, and she did so from the very beginning of her reign. Why? To answer this question, he had to place himself in the first days of her reign. Elizabeth's immediate problem was whether to add to her title, as Henry VIII and Edward VI had done, the phrase "Supreme Head of the Church of England." Elizabeth was also Defender of the Faith, but she was not ready to decide what faith she would defend; and her very choice of title threatened to commit her one way or the other. Then, in Maitland's reconstruction, "a happy thought occurs. Let her highness etceterate herself." If she subsequently submitted to the pope, she could always say that the "et caetera" referred to odds and ends, such as her being queen also of the Channel Islands. If, on the other hand, she decided to remain a Protestant, she could claim that she had simply abbreviated the royal style of her father and her brother.

Thus far Maitland's reading rests on a familiar heuristic of historians, empathetic reconstruction of the agent's situation. He shows that Elizabeth had a good reason to adopt ambiguous language. But the question of Elizabeth's intentions is not easily resolved. If the council quickly decided on a straightforward course of action, as they did, how can we be sure Elizabeth had fixed on such a devious one? The more inscrutable Elizabeth's intentions are made to appear--and she was highly adept at disguising them--the more problematic explanation in terms of those intentions becomes. Despite the elegance of this famous article, Maitland was wrong about Elizabeth's being the first English sovereign to introduce "&c." into her title. In fact--as he seems almost on the verge of seeing--her sister Mary had used the same phrase, and for a very similar reason: she wanted to avoid calling herself "Supreme Head of the Church" before her parliament could meet and nullify the royal supremacy.

Laws and treaties, like regnal titles, although designed to do something or warrant some action, thus have their deliberate and unforeseen ambiguities; and political and diplomatic historians have in the 500 years since Lorenzo Valla's exposure of the spurious Donation of Constantine developed their own hermeneutics of suspicion. I have simplified the case by citing a document which is clearly authentic, whereas the ancient and especially the medieval historian always has to consider the likelihood of forgery. Perhaps half of the surviving medieval charters were forged; as a squire of the eleventh century said disdainfully about the documents which some monks had produced in a suit against him, "With ink one can write anything."

Intellectual historians--latecomers to the historical profession--read the same texts that philosophers and literary critics read. These texts are performative only in a more extended sense; although they may persuade, warn, or admonish, they seldom do so in any straightforward way. And of course they offer far more opportunities for differing readings.

Let us take one final example, eccentric like the others, but revealing in its peculiarities. The subject is one of the most notoriously enigmatic texts in the history of political philosophy, Machiavelli's Il Principe; the reader, Garrett Mattingly. Here is the problem, as Mattingly sets it out: "Although the method and most of the assumptions of The Prince are so much of a piece with Machiavelli's thought that the book could not have been written by anyone else, yet in certain important respects, including some of the most shocking of the epigrams, The Prince contradicts everything else Machiavelli ever wrote and everything we know about his life. And everyone who has studied the subject at all has always known this."

Mattingly then analyzes the reception of the book. For two centuries it was execrated. In the nineteenth century, it was his alleged patriotic motive

that exculpated Machiavelli; in the twentieth century, it was the objecivity of Il Principe, culminating in the accolade that Machiavelli was the first political scientist. Mattingly will have neither of these interpretations; he attempts rather to rehabilitate one of the oldest readings of the book, offered by Alberico Gentili, who claimed that it was a satire, serving the republican cause to which Machiavelli had devoted his life by exposing the machinations of tyrants. The first stage of Mattingly's defense of his reading rests on the biography of Machiavelli, emphasizing his long service to the Florentine republic, his dismissal from office by the Medici, and his subsequent torture at their command. "I suppose," Mattingly concludes, it is possible to imagine that a man who has seen his country enslaved, his life's work wrecked and his own career with it, and has, for good measure, been tortured within an inch of his life should thereupon go home and write a book intended to teach his enemies the proper way to maintain themselves, writing all the time, remember, with the passionless objectivity of a scientist in a laboratory.... It must be possible to imagine such behavior, because Machiavelli scholars do imagine it and accept it without a visible tremor. But it is a little difficult for the ordinary mind to compass."

Having explored the documents of Machiavelli's life, Mattingly turns to his other writings, all of which, he argues, are devoted to showing that popular governments are superior to those of princes. They show a literary sensibility far too subtle to have committed the blunder of writing a book which, if intended seriously, provoked shock, horror, and repulsion rather than agreement. Machiavelli deliberately heightened the shocking character of his maxims, particularly by parodying the well-established genre of handbooks of advice for princes and offering as a model Cesare Borgia, who was "a Spaniard, a bastard...a man especially hated in Tuscany for treachery and

extortion...who as a prince had been a notorious and spectacular failure."

This last claim is the most original part of Mattingly's article. He says that the "almost forgotten fact" of Cesare Borgia's failure is "at the heart of the mystery of The Prince"; and this failure is shown by nothing less than "the facts of history," which he proceeds to cite at considerable length.

All these are difficulties for other readings of Il Principe. If, on the other hand, we read it as a satire, such anomalies disappear, and we can make a different sense of other cruxes. Of these the most serious is the famous final exhortation to free Italy from the barbarians. On any other reading, Mattingly says, this must seem either a rhetorical flourish or calculating but stupid flattery (since Giuliano de Medici was grossly miscast as a possible liberator of Italy); but if Machiavelli's intention was satirical, the last chapter is "charged with an irony turned inward, the bitter mockery of misdirected optimism."

Mattingly's reading of the last chapter is a kind of ideal type of the way intellectual historians read. It has six features: the conjunction of all six is distinctive to the practice of intellectual history. These are: the intellectual historian (1) reads in the light of the inferred intention of the author. These are reconstructed, externally, from a consideration of other texts: (2) all the author's other writings, essential to detect parodies or ironical texts. No matter how frequently we read it, Defoe's Shortest Way with Dissenters can only be seen to be ironical in light of Defoe's political writings, and those of his contemporaries; (3) the details of her or his life--this is what literary critics call the "biographical fallacy" (4) the general historical context in which the author wrote, and (5) how the original readers construed the work--a kind of "reception theory." As Skinner puts it, the meaning of a text resides in an author's intention; but the understanding

of it requires that we grasp its illocutionary force. To do this we have to establish the audience to which any past text was addressed. Internally, the author's intentions are inferred from (6) what she or he does in, and with, the genre in which the work is written.

So first, when confronting even the most problematic text, the intellectual historian behaves just like Maitland trying to puzzle out the meaning of Elizabeth's "&c." She imagines herself in the author's situation and makes her best guess about the intentions which lie behind the text--in other words, not only commits what literary critics call the intentional fallacy, but bases the reading upon it.

This is the most frequent cause of interdisciplinary misunderstanding when historians and literary critics read the same text. But most historians consider approaches not based on the author's inferred intentions dangerous, if not fatal, to historical understanding. Skinner warns that we must not "understand the agent to be doing something which he would not--or even could not--himself have accepted as an account of what he <u>was</u> doing." Richard Hooker had no intention to enunciate a theory of the social contract or Locke one of the political trust, even though such might be anachronistically pieced together from scattered references in their texts. If we believe that "ideas get up and do battle on their own behalf," we can read early writers solely for their "anticipations" of later ones, as when Marsilius is notable for anticipating Machiavelli, who in turn anticipates Marx. With even less justification, these past authors can be praised or blamed according to how well they have anticipated present-day concerns; thus the egregious Allan Bloom says Shakespeare was pessimistic about "the possibility of an interracial, inter-faith society," and <u>Othello</u> is therefore commended as "a text in moral and political education."

Let us now turn finally and hastily from historians reading to reading historians. Historians like to talk as if the ideal historical monograph were constructed solely from primary sources. This is our version of the myth of the pure reading of the isolated text--and just as misleading. No historian ever did, or could, write simply from primary sources. She could not disregard any contemporary secondary sources, and even if she made a point of not reading any works by modern historians, she could not purge her mind of those she read a while ago and has the misfortune of remembering. So historians reading are always reading historians.

As I have defined them, "secondary sources" are what Austin called "constative" utterances, statements about states of affairs which can be evaluated as true or false. When we think of reading historians, we usually think of Herodotus or the memoirs of Bismarck; but we are also reading historians at a much humbler level of discourse. As Carl Becker pointed out fifty years ago, Everyman is his own historian.

Of course when we read we do not trust. In fact we insist on reading the whole of fellow historians' work because we have an ingrained suspicion of what they are up to. Charges of malpractice are essential to historians' work; even if we suppose a complete absence of malice, it must involve discrediting some of the work done by one's immediate predecessors. If this is what we think of our friends who have had all the advantages of modern historical training, we certainly cannot trust the historians of the past, so secondary sources are always checked against primary and vetted for internal consistency.

Reading done in this positivist/realist vein is relatively unproblematic, but it is not enough; and this is where literary criticism has the most to teach historians, as readers of other historians and of themselves. For many

historians a critical reading is one which queries the factual accuracy of the individual statements; Trevor-Roper's reading of Stone, referred to earlier, is a paradigm case. But, while all historians ought to avoid making false statements, no history is simply an aggregation of true ones. Historians use ordinary language, unavoidably charged with all the moral and causal implications and connotations of ordinary language. True statements have to be arranged, and the arrangement will entail a kind of plot. At a deeper level lurk inescapable tropes and literary forms. Desire and the will to persuade cannot be banished even from "constative" utterances, which, in the last analysis, have their own illocutionary force.

The most dramatic instances of reading historians in recent years have been those where historical texts have been subjected to the sort of readings usually reserved for novelists. To historians trained in "documentary" or verificationist readings, where the point is to abstract and test factual claims, reading works of history as novels will seem simply a category mistake. Even historians fond of talking about "historical imagination" tend to agree with this judgment. Yet since the rhetorical aspects of historical work have been so often repressed, such readings do serve to jolt us into attending to them. They can also serve another purpose. They direct our attention to the great historical texts, and remind us how much of that greatness can survive the process of further historical discovery. We might even be moved to emulation; and since we have no way of avoiding rhetoric, why settle for the meager tropology and impoverished rhetoric so drearily typical of modern "professional" historiography?

We might also want to attend to what literary critics mean by the biographical fallacy and the intentional fallacy. Those other texts which are all that can be an "historical context" are not exempt from the undecidability

that besets the text to be interpreted. We are in a hermeneutic circle that can never be closed, if only because of the incompleteness of the historical record. Furthermore, texts can be situated in different "historical contexts."

There are also great, sometimes insoluble, difficulties in finding the intentions of authors. As Skinner admits, the "special authority of an agent over his intentions does not exclude...the possibility that an observer might be in a position to give a fuller or more convincing account of the agent's behavior than he could give himself" and "attempts to think out our problems, instead of being a patterned or even a uniformly purposive activity...[are] rather...an often intolerable wrestle with words and their meanings." In that wrestle, we historians need all the help we can get.

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